



# VA Research Currents

Update from the Office of Research and Development...

## Emerging technologies demand clear, timely policies

By John R. Feussner, MD, MPH, *Chief R&D Officer*

**T**issue banking, stem cell research, gene therapy—these are complicated issues of growing importance for biomedical researchers. As a leader in medical research, VA is constantly striving to ensure that our work in these areas is conducted safely, ethically and efficiently.

Our recent national meeting in Keystone, Colo., provided a forum for discussion and education on these issues. In this column, I will touch on some of the key points from the presentations on emerging technologies. More details can be found on the VA Research website at: [http://www.va.gov/resdev/fr/frmtngs/2001annual/post\\_presentations.cfm](http://www.va.gov/resdev/fr/frmtngs/2001annual/post_presentations.cfm).

- Dr. Philip Lavori, director of our Cooperative Studies Coordinating Center in Palo Alto, presented an overview of CSP's new DNA banking program, which will coordinate oversight committees and advise study planners for clinical trials. The Palo Alto center will work closely with the VA Epidemiology Research and Information Center in Boston, which will serve as a genetic-tissue core laboratory. Dr. Lavori said the guiding principles behind our tissue and genetic information banks will be respect for autonomy, protection of privacy, appropriate disclosure to donors, avoidance of harm to individuals and groups, and fair dealing with commercial interests.

- Dr. Michael Cohen, deputy director of our Medical Research Service, outlined policies and procedures for VA-approved tissue banks. He made clear the distinction between VA-sponsored tissue banks—those that are located at VA facilities, use identifying data under VA control, and contain specimens for future research to be conducted by VA protocols—and VA-approved banks, which are off-site but approved by VA Central Office. In describing the approval process, Dr. Cohen pointed out, for example, that specimens cannot be linked to the veteran's social security number, name or medical record *outside of the VA*

see **POLICIES** on pg. 2

## HSR&D's Management Consultation Program now based in D.C.

The Management Consultation Program of VA's Health Services Research and Development Service has moved from the Management Decision and Research Center (MDRC) in Boston to VA's Central Office in Washington, D.C., to be more closely associated with HSR&D leadership. The program was founded in 1992 to link senior VA managers with VA investigators who can research their questions and provide evidence to help steer policy.

"The program allows VA managers to directly tap the investigative power of VA researchers," said Neil Thakur, PhD, a health services researcher who joined VA in November 2001 to run the program from Central Office. "We help managers conceptualize and frame their question, then we recruit a research team to find answers."

The recruitment effort is often directed first to HSR&D centers of excellence, but the program may also call on investigators at other sites who have the needed expertise. "This informal investigator selection process allows projects to be completed much faster than traditional service-directed or investigator-initiated research," added Dr. Thakur.

According to Carol VanDeusen Lukas, EdD, of MDRC, the time element is usually critical when the program accepts a request: "Most of these projects have a tight time limit," she said. "They have to be done quickly."

Two real examples of how the program works:

see **CONSULTATION** on pg. 3

## POLICIES (cont. from pg. 1)

facility, and that veterans' tissues cannot be banked for commercial gain.

- The potential gains and challenges of genetic testing were the focus of a presentation by Dr. Terry Wepsic, associate chief of staff for research at the Long Beach VAMC. He noted that although such testing may improve medicines and understanding of diseases, it also may involve questions of privacy, potential discrimination and psychosocial stress.

- Similarly, Dr. Rihab Yassin, a program specialist in Medical Research, discussed restrictions on the use of human stem cells in research, noting the potential for scientific advances and the ethical and scientific questions involved. Dr. Yassin noted that VA researchers are permitted to conduct studies using adult somatic stem cells derived from established cell lines meeting certain requirements, but are *not* permitted to do research involving human pluripotent stem cells from human embryos or fetal tissues.

I urge you to visit the VA Research website for a more complete discussion of these topics. VA will continue to develop and refine its policies and procedures in response to the unprecedented pace of scientific advances in these areas. ■

### VA Research Currents

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103 S. Gay St., Rm. 517  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
(410) 962-1800, ext. 223  
researchinfo@vard.org

## Health Services launches new publication

VA's Health Services Research and Development Service published the first issue of *HSR&D Research Briefs* in Nov. 2001. An Adobe PDF version of the newsletter, to be published twice yearly, can be found on the Internet at [www.hsr.d.research.va.gov](http://www.hsr.d.research.va.gov) or on the Intranet at [vaww.hsr.d.research.va.gov](http://vaww.hsr.d.research.va.gov).

*Briefs* is published for HSR&D by the Information Dissemination Program of the Management Decision and Research Center, based at the VA Boston Healthcare System.

The cover story of the 12-page inaugural issue describes findings from a study on cholesterol measurement by VA's IHD-QUERI (Ischemic Health

Disease—Quality Enhancement Research Initiative) group in Seattle. The study, which appeared in the Nov. 15, 2001, *American Journal of Cardiology*, found that of more than 41,000 patients with ischemic heart disease at 24 VA medical centers, 66 percent overall had current test results measuring their low-density lipoprotein ("bad" cholesterol). Broken down by medical center, the percentage varied significantly— from 38 to 82 percent. There was similar variation across the 24 medical centers—from 35 to 68 percent—when the researchers looked at how many patients were on cholesterol-lowering medication.

## What does VA care cost? Palo Alto-based center releases estimates

Cost-effectiveness studies in VA health care have traditionally been difficult because, unlike other U.S. health care providers, VA doesn't routinely prepare patient bills. This problem is being overcome by a new national VA center for health economics research.

VA's Health Economics Resource Center (HERC), based at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, has released comprehensive estimates of VA health care costs for care provided after Oct. 1, 1997. The estimates are based on VA cost data and non-VA measures of relative value.

For inpatient stays, HERC staff used a model of hospital costs incurred in non-VA hospitals by Medicare-eligible veterans. For outpatient visits, the researchers used Medicare payment rates as the measure of relative value. The data set contains one record for each visit in the VA outpatient events file, which records more than 60 million visits per year.

Guidelines for using HERC average-cost data sets are available on HERC's website, [www.herc.research.med.va.gov](http://www.herc.research.med.va.gov). The site also contains frequently asked questions, useful links, and a portal for submitting requests to HERC's helpdesk. The center can be reached by e-mail at [herc@med.va.gov](mailto:herc@med.va.gov).

HERC was established by VA Health Services Research and Development in 1999 to help VA researchers assess the cost-effectiveness of medical care and evaluate the efficiency of VA programs and providers.

## Research proposals sought for veterans' special events

**A**t the National Veterans Wheelchair Games last July in New York City, a group of athletes wore special masks as they played basketball and other sports. The masks enabled researchers to measure oxygen and carbon dioxide exhalation. The testing was part of a study by VA researchers from Hines, Ill., on the effects of aerobic activity on veterans with spinal cord injury.

At the same event, researchers from Pittsburgh tested a new exercise machine called "Game Cycle," designed to make exercise fun for wheelchair users. The Pittsburgh team also studied wheelchair durability and comfort.

Researchers began conducting studies at VA national sporting events

only two years ago, at the Wheelchair Games and the Winter Sports Clinic. Now, VA is looking to expand the effort by inviting funded VA investigators to also conduct research at VA's other two national recreational events: the Golden Age Games and the Creative Arts Festival.

"Within the four different events, you've got such a wide range of populations and disabilities," said Jada Jones, of the VA National Rehabilitation Special Events Management Group. "It's a very rich environment in which to conduct many types of research to benefit veterans and the general population." She added that research can provide strong evidence of the benefits of the events on veteran-participants.

Sandy Trombetta, director of the Winter Sports Clinic, offered examples of how the potential benefits to participants might be explored through formal studies: comparing hospital admissions or medication usage of participating versus non-participating veterans; or comparing various self-actualization parameters—employment, family life, community service, college attendance, etc.—among participating versus non-participating veterans. He stressed, however, that any number of diverse topics might be pursued.

For details on how to submit a proposal for research at this year's events, and for event dates, contact Jada Jones at (202) 273-7225 or [ofojjone@vba.va.gov](mailto:ofojjone@vba.va.gov). ■

### CONSULTATION (cont. from pg. 1)

- In 1998, the Under Secretary for Health requested a system-wide evaluation of VA's Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). The Management Consultation Program, then based at MDRC, formed a consortium of HSR&D researchers to do a study. The team was led by Michael Chapko, PhD, of VA's Seattle-based Northwest Center for Outcomes Research in Older Adults. The study showed that CBOCs were largely successful and offered "a promising strategy for providing accessible, cost-effective care to veterans outside the traditional hospital setting." Reports can be found on the VA Intranet at <http://vaww.va.gov/resdev/cboc.htm>.

- In connection with the Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, which expanded VA's provision of long-term care to veterans, Congress mandated three evaluations: a study of a pilot program to provide assisted-living care for veterans; a study of three models of all-inclusive long-term care; and an overall assessment of VA's experience under the long-term-care provisions of the Act. The Management Consultation Program has organized teams of researchers from HSR&D centers of excellence in Bedford (Mass.), Seattle and Hines (Ill.) to conduct the three evaluations and provide answers to Congress.

According to Dr. Thakur, working with the Management Consultation Program can offer special satisfaction to investigators.

"Since these proposals answer a specific policy or operational question, they offer investigators a unique guarantee that their research will be timely and influential," he said.

For more information on the program contact Dr. Thakur at (202) 273-7657 or [neil.thakur@hq.med.va.gov](mailto:neil.thakur@hq.med.va.gov).

### VA Research on the Web

The main Internet site for VA's Office of Research and Development, [www.va.gov/resdev](http://www.va.gov/resdev), contains descriptions of the four Research services along with timely information on funding opportunities, positions within VA, meetings, guidelines and more.

There are also downloadable technical reports, newsletters and primers. Of special note, current and back issues of *VA Research Currents* are available, in PDF format, under the "What's New" heading.

## Upcoming events

### Epidemiology course for VA researchers

VA's Epidemiologic Research and Information Centers (ERICs) will host the Fourth Annual Summer Epidemiology Session June 24 – 28, 2002, at the University of Washington in Seattle. The goal of the seminar is to teach VA researchers, clinicians and administrators about epidemiologic principles and methods, and to provide technical assistance for specific projects. The event will include eight mini-courses, organized into three tracks: Clinical Epidemiology, Basic Review of Biostatistics, and Evidence-Based Medicine/ Critical Reading of Medical Literature; Outcomes and Effectiveness Research, Advanced Biostatistics and Clinical Trials; and Grant Writing and Quality Improvement.

To receive more details or a registration packet, log on to the Seattle ERIC website at [www.eric.seattle.med.va.gov](http://www.eric.seattle.med.va.gov), or e-mail [carrie.mccloud@med.va.gov](mailto:carrie.mccloud@med.va.gov).

### VA Research Week: March 31 – April 6

National VA Research Week will take place March 31 – April 6, 2002. In past years, VA medical centers have organized events such as conferences, poster sessions, exhibits, award ceremonies and receptions for legislators, reporters and veterans' representatives.

Research offices at VA medical centers should receive a packet from R&D Communications within the next few weeks containing posters, fact sheets about VA research, and suggestions for special events. Included will be a form that centers can use to report their plans to R&D Communications and John R. Feussner, MD, MPH, chief R&D officer. Research administrators are encouraged to collaborate with their public affairs officers, who will also be receiving packets.

Research offices are also encouraged to submit photos of their center's Research Week activities for possible use in R&D Communications publications or displays.

For more information on Research Week contact Christine Amereihn, R&D Communications, at (410) 962-1800, ext. 273, or [chris@vard.org](mailto:chris@vard.org).

### Photos for annual report

In addition to photos of Research Week activities, the R&D Communications Office needs photos of ongoing research for use in the 2002 Office of Research and Development annual report. The photos should be high-resolution color images, supplied as 35mm slides; prints with negatives; or digital files, showing research staff at work. Images should be photojournalistic in style—that is, not posed snapshots—and portray investigators conducting research in the lab or office or in clinical settings.

Images must be received by July 2, 2002. For more details—including samples of photos from past annual reports—or to submit new photos for the 2002 annual report, e-mail R&D Communications at [researchinfo@vard.org](mailto:researchinfo@vard.org) or call (410) 962-1800, ext. 223.

- Emerging technologies
  - and VA policy
  - Study proposals sought for veterans' events
  - What does VA care cost?
- Inside this issue...

VA Research and Development Communications  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
103 S. Gay St., Rm. 517  
Baltimore, MD 21202